

# “I Don’t Understand It, It Doesn’t Look Old to Me.”

By William Burke, Park Historian

*“Well-meaning people may think that the old Cape Cod character should be kept frozen, believing that new buildings should be shrouded in an historical shell from the past. The Cape Cod shore is not a museum; it lives, it grows, it changes . . . Architecture must move on, or die.”*

Walter Gropius, *On the Desirable Character of Design for the Cape Cod National Seashore*, submitted to the Cape Cod National Seashore Advisory Commission in 1963

Walter Gropius, founder of the influential German Bauhaus school of design, implored the managers of the brand new Cape Cod National Seashore to design facilities, such as visitor centers and bathhouses, with an innovative approach. Rustic cabin design found in Western national parks wouldn’t work here, but Modern design featuring modest scale and a light footprint on the land would. The seashore, after all, was a new type of park never tried before, created within the confines of six towns,

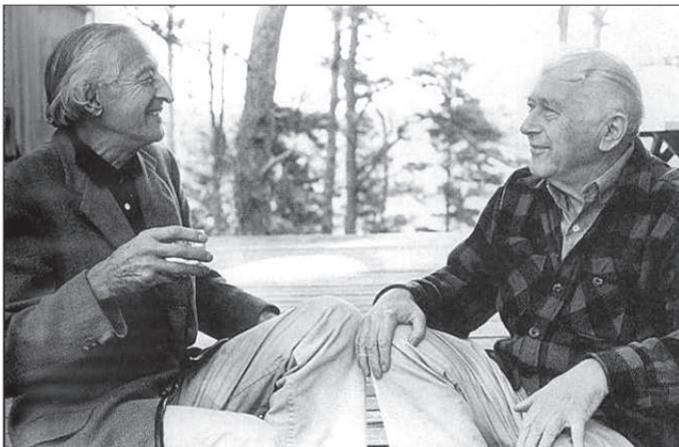
grow in importance in our minds, but it’s usually the stuff created further back in time that tends to get revered and ultimately saved.

So, how can Modern houses from the 1950s and 1960s, or for that matter, our own Salt Pond Visitor Center be historic? The official list of what’s historic in our nation, known as the National Register of Historic Places, has a 50 year rule that is meant to allow a few generations to pass so

people can develop historical perspective on what is really important to a community’s memory. After all, we don’t want things preserved that are, in the National Register’s words, of “passing contemporary interest.”

Like most rules, however, there are exceptions. Things less than 50 years old can be listed on the register if they pass a

more stringent set of criteria that includes extensive scholarly documentation that finds the thing in question to be “exceptionally important.”

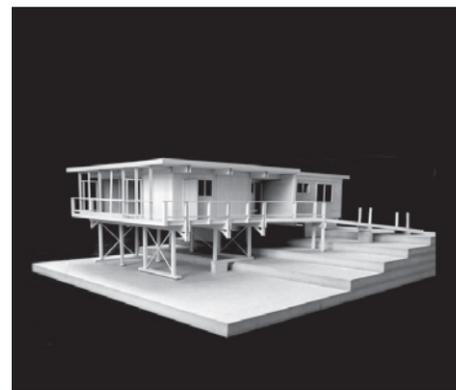


Old friends and Modern architects Serge Chermayeff and Marcel Breuer, originally from Russia and Hungary respectively, enjoy a moment together near their vacation cottages in Wellfleet in 1972. Both designed a number of houses in the ponds area of Wellfleet beginning in the late 1940s. (Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution, Marcel Breuer Papers Collection)

and needing an architectural identity. In a sense, Gropius was simply promoting a continuation of a movement that had taken firm hold here earlier. Since World War II, Modern architects like Breuer, Chermayeff, and Hammarstrom had been quietly inserting into the scented pine forests of Wellfleet architectural gems to be enjoyed by their clients or themselves. Free from the turmoil of their native Europe, these architects had found a paradise to work and vacation in, and other local architects and designers took inspiration from them.

Today, there are over 50 significant Modern houses from this lineage on the Outer Cape, and the seashore and local preservation groups are spearheading an effort to preserve some of them for future generations to appreciate, understand, and enjoy. Of those Modern-era houses owned by the seashore, five homes and one visitor center have been deemed historic thus far.

Every day, in every village, town, and city throughout the world, people sort out things from their community’s past that are worth saving. Usually, it’s the village’s oldest dwelling, a town’s first church, a city’s oldest library, or an ancient battlefield in an abandoned field. We tend to connect significance with the age, relative scarcity, or one-of-a-kind nature of a building. This thinking may cause us to skip over the “past of the living,” a past we ourselves experienced that holds little comfort afforded by time and distance. Unfortunately, this mentality makes recent things more vulnerable to demolition. Objects and places of our parent’s or grandparent’s generation may



The 1953 Weidlinger House was designed by prominent structural engineer Paul Weidlinger for his family’s vacation home on Higgins Pond in Wellfleet. It illustrates the all-embracing attitude toward Modern design, taking into account the topography and environment and treading lightly on the land. (Model by Ben Straco. Photo by Mark Walker. Photo courtesy of Peter McMahan, Cape Cod Modern House Trust)



The Hatch House (1960) is nestled into a hillside on Bound Brook Island with sweeping views of Cape Cod Bay. Lightweight panels on the west wall shown here open up to the view with a simple pull of the ropes. (National Park Service photo)

## Lease Anticipated with the Cape Cod Modern House Trust to Preserve Historic Kugel-Gips House

The Kugel-Gips House is an historic Modern house owned by Cape Cod National Seashore. The park is actively working with a new, local, non-profit group, the Cape Cod Modern House Trust, to develop a lease agreement for long-term preservation and use of the house. The agreement would enable scholars-in-residence and others interested in Modern architecture in Wellfleet to enjoy first-hand the experience of living and working in a Modern house. Stay tuned for formal announcement of this exciting opportunity!



Reminiscent of Wright’s *Falling Waters*, the Kugel-Gips House exhibits classic Modern house characteristics: flat roof, open floor plan, expansive windows, and intimate connection with the outdoors. (National Park Service photo)

For example, most could agree that structures, objects and places associated with the U.S. Space Program, Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War, assassination of President Kennedy, and Elvis Presley’s Graceland could be “historic.”

In addition, things on the register don’t have to be considered nationally significant; they could be significant at the local or state level. The Modern houses of Wellfleet are significant at the local level because they are associated with the larger Modern architectural phenomenon transforming post-war America, and they represent unaltered

survivors of this vintage and style on the Outer Cape.

So where does one draw the line between past and present? There is no clear line of demarcation, but we now know that excluding much of the 20th century from the past was a mistake. A strong continuum between the past and the present makes the past seem more relevant to our own lives. What we preserve for future generations is as much about what’s saved as it is about how we value the built environment in our own backyards.



The modernistic Salt Pond Visitor Center (1965) was a clear departure from the traditional rustic architecture of parks. It has features typical of “Mission 66” visitor centers like views of the landscape through glass, separate wings for museums and theaters, and use of concrete, glass, and steel throughout. The building was found eligible for the National Register of Historic Places in 2000. (National Park Service photo)

*“A man builds a house for himself and his family on Cape Cod in the woods by a lake near the sea, and everything in his house seems to be made of natural fiber, of wood, skin, hemp, fur; and the wind carries clean air and every sound is muted. No war seems to have been – only airplanes with their trails of sound and vapor remind you of the bustling trivia outside this sanctuary.”*

from Memorial to Gyorgy Kepes, January 4, 2002. Hungarian-born designer Kepes was a summer resident of Wellfleet and close associate of many Modern architects. He was the founder of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

### For further subject matter information:

*Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma*, Ethan Carr. UMASS Press, 2007

### Websites

### of interest:

[www.recentpast.org](http://www.recentpast.org)  
[www.historicnewengland.org](http://www.historicnewengland.org)  
[www.docomomo-us.org](http://www.docomomo-us.org)  
[www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/recentpast](http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/recentpast)  
[www.nthp.org](http://www.nthp.org) - National Trust for Historic Preservation  
[www.modernsandiego.com](http://www.modernsandiego.com), click on “Modern Cape Cod”